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NASA launches first unmanned rocket since Columbia disaster

• [Space shuttle disaster updates, photos, video](#)

Monday, April 28

In the first NASA launch since the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated over Texas on Feb. 1, the agency fired into orbit Monday a satellite designed to measure ultraviolet light from distant galaxies in an effort to better understand their origins.

The air-launch took place atop a Pegasus rocket dropped from a specially designed L-1011 Stargazer aircraft about 100 nautical miles east-northeast of Cape Canaveral.

The modified jumbo jet lumbered skyward from its runway at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station at 7:03 a.m. Monday, carrying the 55-long rocket strapped to its belly. An hour after liftoff, the winged rocket was released at an altitude of 39,000 feet and allowed to free-fall for five seconds before the first stage of the Pegasus solid rocket fired, propelling the spacecraft into orbit.

The heart of the Galaxy Evolution Explorer spacecraft, or GALEX, is a 19.7-inch diameter telescope that will provide a wide-angle view of the ultraviolet light emitted by distant galaxies. By measuring the ultraviolet light, astronomers hope to learn more about galaxies dominated by young, hot, short-lived stars that give off a great deal of energy at that wavelength.

Astronomers believe that by learning more about these young stars, they can map out the history of star and galaxy formation.

The \$103.7 million mission is to survey the light given off by a million galaxies over a 28-month period.

The satellite will go through a monthlong inspection before it begins gathering data. After the information has been checked it is to be released publicly to allow scientists worldwide to consider its implications.

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